

# Mylk Fad



“Mylks”

# White Gold

## How wellness upstarts spoiled milk’s healthy reputation – and built a billion-dollar industry from juicing oats and nuts. Oliver Franklin-Wallis

Fortunately, when it comes to milk, in 2019 there is no shortage of alternative alternatives. Visit your local supermarket and you will find a refrigerated aisle overflowing with choice: almond milk, hazelnut milk, peanut, tiger nut, walnut, cashew – and that’s just the nuts. Coconut, hemp, spelt, quinoa, pea – you name it, somewhere a health-food startup is milking it. London tube stations are filled with ads for new plant milks – or rather, “mylks” (EU law prevents dairy alternatives from using the word milk if it isn’t produced by a lactating mammal). Cookbooks dedicate entire chapters to blending and straining your own. Sainsbury’s now stocks around 70 different options. There are the wellness punks (Rebel Kitchen, Rude Health), the dairy puns (Malk, Milkadamia, Mooala) and the nourishers (LoveRaw, Good Karma, Plenish). “People are just looking at every nut that exists and seeing if they can squash it into a milk,” said Glynis Murray, one of the owners of Good, which squashes hemp seeds into oil and milk.

It seems unthinkable now, but as recently as 2008, alternatives to cow’s milk largely meant soya (invariably Alpro in the UK, Silk in the US). For anything else, you’d need to scour health-food shops for drab, clinical-looking, long-life cartons of rice milk buried in the back with the other digestive aids. “It was the deathly aisle,” said John Schoolcraft, Oatly’s global creative director. “It was just for people who were lactose intolerant [or] had an allergy to milk; vegans, vegetarians – people who, at that time, were on the fringe of society.”

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# ‘Consumers are really not sure about the dairy industry.’

But the plant milk boom is, as one entrepreneur told me, “way bigger than just switching your milk”. To converts, almond and oat milk are the next wave in a fundamental shift towards a more conscious, sustainable way of living. To critics, they’re little more than cleverly marketed nut juice with additives – a symptom of everything that’s wrong with modern food culture. And so a strange battle has emerged, between an industry trying to replace something it says we don’t need in the first place, and dairy, a business that for a century sold itself as the foundation of a healthy diet, while ignoring the fact that most of the world does just fine without it.

That schism between milk-drinkers and the rest – actually a series of independent genetic mutations – appears to have occurred about 10,000 years ago, around the time humans were domesticating farm animals. It is the reason that in countries such as the UK, Sweden and Ireland, more than 90% of adults can drink milk without suffering any ill effects, but worldwide, more than two-thirds of all adults are considered lactose intolerant. For lactose-intolerant people, a glass of milk can induce bloating, stomach pains and diarrhoea. (Lactose intolerance should not be – though often is – confused with cow’s milk allergy, an immune response to the proteins in cow’s milk that affects around 1% of UK adults.)

It was the first world war that ultimately aligned political forces behind the dairy business. In Britain, rationing meant food was limited, and child malnutrition was

rife. The emerging field of nutritional science identified milk – with its high protein content and newly discovered “vital amines”, or vitamins – as a potential solution. Thanks to government price controls, milk was one thing not in short supply. Soon, “consumers everywhere witnessed a snowfall of propaganda documenting the miracles worked by milk”, writes Deborah Valenze in *Milk: A Local and Global History*. Milk became the original superfood: a boundless source of calcium, protein and vitamins. In 1946, Clement Attlee and Harry S Truman’s governments both passed measures to ensure milk was available free with school meals. Industry alliances like the UK’s Milk Marketing Board embarked on campaigns to enhance milk’s image. More recently, in the US, the Got Milk? Campaign showed celebrities from Beyoncé to Kermit the Frog with milk moustaches. The message was clear: if you wanted your children to grow up big and strong, they needed to be drinking milk.

Plant milks received a boost from their association with clean eating, a craze that has also had the effect of linking dairy with negative health issues. Clean eating, advocated by a fresh-skinned, glossy crop of wellness

bloggers and Instagram celebrities, argued for the elimination of any foods deemed overly processed, allergenic, or otherwise “unnatural”: gluten, caffeine, meat and dairy. Its proponents blamed lactose intolerance as the cause of a range of ailments, including acne, eczema, lethargy, joint pain and a variety of digestive issues. And, as the clean eaters warned their readers off dairy, they sent them into the willing arms of plant milk startups. A steady supply of attractive millennial influencers filled their Instagram feeds with appetising shots of peanut-milk Thai curries and gluten-free beetroot bread. (According to industry analysts, one of the keys to the plant-based trend is that it looks appetising on Instagram.) The clean eaters did what years of vegan campaigning never could. Suddenly, giving up milk wasn’t just a health issue. It was part of living your best and most beautiful life.

# ‘Unnatural’

# ‘Got Milk?’

# “digestive superiority”



Soya's real break came in the late 90s, when a Colorado soya company called WhiteWave made what seems like a confoundingly obvious discovery: if they moved the product to the refrigerated aisle alongside the dairy milk, more people bought it. WhiteWave's new refrigerated soya drink, which it called Silk, was a sensation. At the same time, Silk, Alpro and others jumped on emerging evidence about the link between high cholesterol and heart disease to market themselves as a healthy alternative. All of a sudden, soya was for everyone.

Soya's rapid growth was short-lived, in large part due to the fact that it doesn't taste very good. Even modern soya milks, which add sugar, thickeners and other additives to imitate dairy milk, have a beany taste and odour. In the early 2000s, soya had its own health scare. Soya contains phytoestrogens, oestrogen-like compounds that can mimic the hormone's effects in humans, a discovery that led to fears about it disrupting hormones and "feminising" men. Clinical studies have consistently shown those fears are overstated. Even so, neo-Nazis continue to push the theory that soya milk is a liberal conspiracy to emasculate men, and drink cow's milk at rallies to demonstrate "digestive superiority".

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# ‘superfood’

Meanwhile, the California almond industry embarked on a vast marketing spree, funding – and publicising – new research into the health benefits of almonds. The effect was immediate. Glossy magazines proclaimed almonds a “superfood”. Almond Breeze was so successful that within two years Silk launched its own almond milk to try and keep up. By 2013, almond had overtaken soya as the best-selling plant milk in the US.

What most plant milks are desperate to tell you is what they don't have in them. Dairy-free; sugar-free; soya-free; gluten-free; GMO-free; bisphenol A-free – in some cases, the “free from” declarations are actually longer than the ingredients list. Califia Farms boasts its products are carrageenan-free, despite the widely used stabiliser being approved as safe by the European commission, the US Food and Drug Administration and the WHO. It's the inevitable culmination of today's anxious eating culture: we've gone from buying foods on the merits of their ingredients, to buying them on the basis of what's left out.

But the plant milk boom is not really about nutrition. Nor is it the first wave of a shift towards ethical, plant-based living – much as we need it. “Those other things might be on people's lists, but they're secondary selling characteristics,” explained Julian Mellentin, director of New Nutrition Business, a food industry analyst firm that has tracked plant milk's rise. He pointed out that 90% of plant milk buyers still purchase other dairy products, like cheese and ice cream, both of which are still growing. The forces driving us towards plant milk are really something bigger: a manifestation of a collective anxiety that something is wrong with our bodies. That we aren't as healthy and happy as we could be – or perhaps, should be – and something, or someone, must be to blame.

# ‘free from’